

Chapter Four

The three soldiers were confined to barracks – by the weather, rather than as a result of any disciplinary action. It was just after the fall of Berlin, and the re-organisation of post-War Germany was already well under way. Tom, Bram and Alistair were part of a contingent that had remained in the west of the country to assist with security during the re-building.

The winter weather was dreadful, with much snow and wind, and blizzard conditions for days on end. Alistair struggled in through the door, forcing it shut against the weather.

“Blimey!” he exclaimed, “It’s a bit nippy out there.”

Tom and Bram looked up from their make-work tasks – polishing boots and sewing buttons back onto their uniforms. Alistair shrugged himself out of his outdoor clothing, and came to sit on the bottom bunk, close to the stove, and warmed his hands. The dormitory was almost deserted, since most of the troops had already been shipped back to Blighty.

Alistair stared thoughtfully at the coals burning on the stove for several long minutes.

“Hmm. This weather reminds me of a story my Granddad told me years ago, when I was but a nipper,” he said, “It’s a tale of a bizarre journey, to a strange part of the world. You lads want to hear it?”

Tom looked up bright-eyed and sat back on his bunk, eager for any entertainment which would relieve the tedium. Bram looked at Alistair strangely for a moment, but then smiled widely and nodded.

Alistair settled himself on the bunk, making himself comfortable and putting his hands behind his back.

“Granddad had a great fund of colourful stories, which he used to tell to me and my cousins at bedtime. This was one of my favourites. I’m sure he told it to us several times, over the years, and I suspect the details had been a little embellished in later tellings.”

“It seems that my Granddad was quite a traveller in his younger days. Footloose and fancy-free, I suppose a bit of a rogue. He spent many years drifting around different parts of the world. In truth, I suspect he was something of a hired warrior, a mercenary of some sort. I sometimes wondered why he came to our remote part of Scotland.”

“Perhaps he had made a few too many enemies in his travels?” Tom suggested, half-jokingly.

Alistair laughed.

“That’s a thought which had occurred to me,” he said. “Certainly, he kept himself to himself, by all accounts, rarely leaving the farm. He was already well into middle age when he married my Grandmother. I’m told it was quite a scandal at the time, my Granny being so much younger than him.”

Tom wondered if at least part of the scandal was that Alistair’s grandparents were not quite married when she fell pregnant. In deference to Alistair’s feelings, he avoided probing into the salacious details.

“So, what happened to your Granddad?” he asked.

“Oh, he’s dead now,” Alistair replied. “He died quite suddenly, a long time ago, in his bed, with his boots off. Quite an achievement for the old rascal, I reckon.”

Bram and Tom chuckled.

“Anyway, it seems that Granddad was in Siberia,” Alistair continued. “He was part of a company trading in skins: bearskins, horsehides and leather, all tanned hides not made up into clothing. The story goes that the route they used regularly was haunted by robbers and bandits, and so the company employed trail guards. And that’s what Granddad’s job was.”

“The caravan’s starting-point was a trading station at Vanavara, a small market in a desolate part of the country. Their destination was altogether more mysterious. It was many days ride from the trading post, along the Tunguska River, in the hills northwest of Lake Baikal.”

Alistair now had the complete attention of his audience as he continued his tale.

“According to Granddad, this area had quite a reputation for being both impenetrable and dangerous. It was in the middle of immense pine forests, and got lots of snow during much of the year. But there was a road of sorts, well a track really, not easily passable in places, which wended its way into the hills. The path was narrow and winding, with some danger of rock falls and avalanches. It was more-or-less all right by horse and wagon in summer and in winter horse-drawn sledges could be used.”

“In winter, the way was particularly treacherous. There were frequent heavy snowfalls and blizzards, leaving deep snowdrifts which often blocked the route. The thick, dense forest was home to

wolves and bears, and meant it was easy to get lost – and the rocky crags and gorges make sure it was fatal if you did so.”

“Sounds worse than here,” Bram said, looking out of the window at the snow swirling past.

Both Tom and Alistair laughed.

“It was,” Alistair agreed, “All-in-all, a trackless wasteland with no local habitation and no-one living nearby. There were no woodcutters or animal herders, so the forest was heavily overgrown, and the path infrequently used and difficult to follow. Granddad said that the only thing that made the journey possible at all in winter was that there were a few rude shelters along the way, well-hidden and hard to find unless you know where to look. But there was no permanent habitation, no inns. It was a three-day journey, in good weather; in the blizzard season, it could take weeks to get to the pass.”

“So what was the destination?” Tom asked.

Alistair looked contemplative for a few moments before continuing.

“Well, it was a small market – more a village hosting a market rather than a trading post like the one at Vanavara. The only known route to the market was via a narrow ravine, a winding gorge, surrounded on every side by crags and rocky hills.”

“And to get into the gorge, you have to pass the castle. Seen from a distance, the ancient castle appears to be tumbledown and derelict. But in some strange way that Granddad never really made clear, once you got closer, the fortifications were found to actually be in very good condition, with stout gates in good working order and thick stone walls. The castle stood to one side of the path that enters the gorge. In fact, Granddad said, you practically have to walk under its walls to enter the ravine.”

“Was the castle deserted?” Bram asked.

“Or haunted?” added Tom.

Alistair grinned.

“Oh no,” he replied, “The castle itself had a garrison – of sorts. At first glance, it appeared that a company of soldiers had taken temporary shelter in the buildings. But looking more closely, Granddad observed shrewdly, you could see the signs of a long-term habitation. The stabling and tack room was well-organised, there were wagons and sledges under tarpaulins hidden away, and the mess room and kitchen seemed very warm and welcoming.”

There was another thoughtful pause, as if Alistair was comparing his own military experiences with the childhood tale for the first time.

“It also seemed to be surprisingly well-armed,” he said slowly, “Including a few large field guns and a plentiful stock of ammunition.”

“The caravan did not stop at the castle, but pressed on into the ravine. The path wound through the gorge, passing alongside a rushing stream in several places. Granddad described the splash and spray of the rapidly moving water, and the incredible noise, the roar of the rapids, fed by waterfalls on either side.”

“The spray from the stream meant that the path was often wet underfoot, and exceptionally icy and dangerously slippery in winter. You had to walk carefully, testing every step, to avoid catastrophe.”

“Eventually, you reached a tarn – a still pool with barely any movement of the water, except where the lake is fed by small streams and runoff waterfalls. The pool was supposed to have mysterious properties, and Granddad said that they were advised not to linger there, although exactly what those properties might be was never made clear. And strangely, after that, the water in the gorge flowed the other way.”

“After the pool, the gorge seemed eerily familiar, as if you were retracing your steps but not in any way you could articulate. Granddad said that you couldn’t point at a rock or a crag or a tree and say, I’ve seen that before, with any kind of conviction. It was just a feeling, a feeling that was amplified when you first caught sight of the castle on the other side.”

“Another castle?” Tom asked, breath bated.

“Yes, indeed,” Alistair continued, “It seemed identical, but again, in no way which can be easily identified.”

Tom found himself thinking along military lines as he listened to Alistair’s story.

“So, the gorge and streams, they’re all difficult to traverse and naturally defensible,” he said thoughtfully, “And with castles to add extra protection.”

“Well, yes,” Alistair agreed, “It was almost as if the two castles were built at the same time, with an agreement to ensure that they were of equal strength, with the only differences being to accommodate local geography. Then, they were subsequently modified and extended – by adding earthworks for example – in different ways, for different military needs. Just like a pair of semi-detached houses, built to be identical, but reworked extensively and differently by a series of over-enthusiastic tenants.”

Both Bram and Tom smirked at the imagery.

“The other castle also has an informal garrison,” Alistair continued, “They had different uniforms, and spoke a different language. But, even so, the garrison was similar in many ways – it had the same number of men, although Granddad did not report on their armaments.”

“As you move away from the gorge and the castle, the country seems more and more different. The further you go, the more different it appears. My Granddad always said that the strangest thing about this trip was the change in the surroundings once you had made it through the ravine. When you approach the gorge, you had to travel for endless miles over snowy wastes, but it was basically flat. Once through the gorge, you made your way steeply downhill, finally emerging from a pass in the mountains. Granddad described how you could see across the valley to the mountains on the other side.”

“It was almost as if you had been suddenly transported into a much warmer climate. Something like it is here in Germany: snowy and freezing cold in winter, but very warm, even too hot in summer. And the people were different, too – friendly enough, but Granddad said that they spoke a language like no other he had heard. He had little to do when they reached the market, since others in his party would conduct the negotiations for the sale of their wares. Then, they would load up the wagons or sledges again – there was always something to trade on the return trip, but he said that the wagons were never quite as full on the way back. But there was always money, gold – Granddad once told me that he had bought the farm in Sutherland with the money he made from these trips.”

The companions fell silent for a few moments, evidently thinking about the story Alistair had just related. Then Tom spoke up.

“So why did your Granddad stop trading and retire to Scotland?”

“I don’t know,” Alistair responded, “I know that Granddad made several trips. Apparently, on the last visit, the trading party was turned back by the garrison on the other side of the gorge, so that they had to retrace their steps with full wagons. No one knew why they had not been allowed through this time, given that they had been permitted to do so on many previous occasions.”

“I got the impression that there was a certain amount of muttering and speculation among the party. Some people even thought the reason was because of my grandfather’s presence with them. I can’t see how that could have been, though. He never said why people might have thought that.”

Alistair looked lost in thought for a few moments, then continued.

“So, my Granddad’s party left the gorge and made their way back to the Vanavara trading post – a five-day trip with full wagons in poor weather. They stayed there overnight, making plans, I suppose, about what to do next.”

“And then there was another very strange thing. The following morning, there was a tremendous explosion from the direction they had just come! There was an enormous flash of light in the sky and, a few moments later, a huge bang and an immense blast of wind. It knocked Granddad off his feet, he said, and shied the horses something rotten.”

Tom was astonished.

“What happened?” he asked urgently.

“I don’t know. Granddad always said that there was much rumour and speculation, but no one actually had any idea what had happened. There was no explanation given, either at the time or later.”

Alistair explained that his grandfather had later heard that trees had been flattened for miles around, but no one was at all sure what had caused the blast.

“So what happened after that,” Tom pressed.

“Well, the trading party was disbanded, and Granddad was advised to take his earnings and make himself scarce. Again, no one exactly said why, but he did wonder if it had anything to do with the castles and the military garrisons.”

“Was this about the time of the Russian revolution? Before the Great War?” Bram asked, out of the blue.

“Um, I’m not sure,” Alistair answered, “I suppose it was just a few years before.”

Bram nodded sagely, then smiled enigmatically.

“Well, perhaps you’ll find out what it was all about some day,” he suggested.

“Well, maybe,” Alistair countered, “But most certainly not while I’m in the Army.”